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THE URBAN AGENDA
By David R. Jones

Another Health Reform: Paid Sick Leave

The health care reform legislation passed last month in Washington will eventually extend coverage to millions of Americans. But here in New York City, many workers who might already have health coverage are dissuaded from taking care of themselves and their families because they do not get any paid sick leave on their jobs.

Working When Sick

In October of last year, the Community Service Society (CSS) and A Better Balance released a report, "Sick in the City: What the Lack of Paid Leave Means for Working New Yorkers," that in line with national findings indicated that workers without paid sick leave often go to work sick.

Between 1.65 million and 1.85 million working New Yorkers are without paid sick leave. The latest CSS survey of New Yorkers, "The Unheard Third," revealed that only about 40 percent of low-income workers receive paid sick leave on the job compared to two-thirds of higher income workers. Since the survey also found that more than half of low-income New Yorkers have less than $500 in savings for emergencies, the choice for those without paid sick leave between working when ill or staying home is moot.

A bill to mandate paid sick leave for all workers in New York City was introduced in the City Council last year by Councilmember Gale Brewer. Although many Council members favored the bill, it never came to a vote. It was reintroduced on March 25.

The bill currently has 34 supporters. This is an important number because the Council would need a two-thirds majority to overcome a potential mayoral veto. In the 51 member Council, it takes at least 34 votes to override a veto. As far as we know, nine members have either come out against the bill or are leaning against supporting it. The Council Speaker, Christine Quinn, has said she won't take a position until hearings on the bill are held in May.

The major opposition to paid sick leave comes from some in the business community. Their argument is that an economic recession is not the time to introduce paid sick leave; that it would be an added hardship on business. But there are also enlightened business owners who support paid sick leave - the USA Latino Chamber of Commerce and New York Women's Chamber of Commerce, for example - because they understand that they are better off when sick workers don't come in and get everyone else sick.

A Right to Sick Leave

The bill states that all employees have the right to paid sick leave – nine days a year for employees of large businesses and five days a year for employees of small businesses. Changing the definition of a small business from under 10 employees to fewer than 20 in the new bill will mean that most businesses will only have to provide five days.

New York City is not the first place to introduce mandated paid sick leave. In November 2006, the San Francisco Paid Sick Leave Ordinance passed as a ballot initiative sponsored by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. In March 2008, the District of Columbia became the second locality to pass a mandate guaranteeing paid sick leave. Milwaukee voters passed a sick leave mandate in November 2008.

Many of us take it for granted that we can stay home from work when we are ill or to care for a sick child or spouse. When you get sick, it's probably in your interest and that of your employer, as well as your co-workers, that you stay home.

But for many low-wage workers who must put their personal health at risk or fear the loss of their job, staying at home is not an option. More than three million New Yorkers – overwhelmingly black and Latino residents - live in low-wage households. These low-income New Yorkers comprise nearly 40 percent of the city's population.

Paid sick leave is important to all of us for a number of reasons. When parents are unable to take time off from their jobs to attend to a sick child at home, it often means that the child goes to school ill, quite possibly infecting other children. Low-wage employees in areas such as restaurant workers and security guards who get no paid sick leave on the job are a threat to our health and security when they feel forced to work when ill.

Sick children in school, security guards ill on the job, ailing restaurant workers handling food – what we have here is a public health hazard. The Council should pass the paid sick leave bill and Mayor Bloomberg should sign it into law. If he vetoes it, the Council should then pass it over his veto. The bottom line is that no one who works in New York City should be forced to choose between his job or his health.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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